

COVID-19 pandemic drives global increase in humanitarian food assistance needs

Measures to suppress the transmission of COVID-19 result in sharp declines in income among many poor households

FEWS NET is monitoring the multiple impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on acute food insecurity in monitored countries. The following Global Food Security Alerts are a part of a monthly series that aim to provide an update of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on acute food insecurity across FEWS NET geographies, highlighting countries of greatest concern.

Summary

At the beginning of 2020, conflict, poor macroeconomic conditions, and weather shocks were already driving high food assistance needs across the globe. The onset and progression of the COVID-19 pandemic, and measures taken to suppress its spread, are likely to further increase the magnitude and severity of acute food insecurity. FEWS NET estimates 94 million people will be in need of humanitarian food assistance in 2020 across its 29¹ presence and remotely monitored countries, 55 percent above the five-year average of food assistance needs for the same countries, and a 25 percent increase in the span of just one year (Figure 1).

Status of the pandemic

The [World Health Organization](#) (WHO) estimates that between February 28 and April 23, 2020, 7,406 COVID-19 cases and 323 associated deaths were recorded across the 29 countries that FEWS NET monitors. This represents only the known scale of the outbreak, which is widely believed to be an underestimate due to limited testing. While it is not possible to predict the length and severity of the outbreak in each country, epidemiological models suggest a high number of cases is likely across the countries FEWS NET monitors, and this is expected to place a strain on already-burdened health systems; associated control measures will undermine the livelihood activities poor households depend on to buy food and non-food essentials.

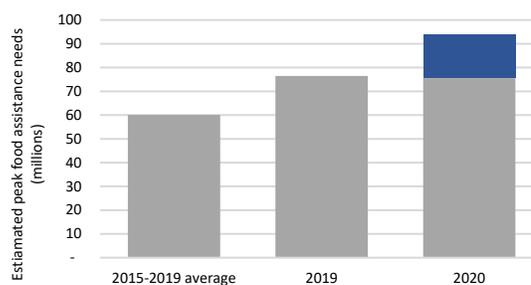
Current and anticipated impacts on food availability and access

The negative effects of COVID-19 on acute food insecurity are driven in large part by the indirect impacts of the pandemic, as governments and communities put in place control measures to suppress the spread of the virus. These control measures are restricting access to income-earning activities, resulting in real and immediate negative impacts on poor households' ability to cover daily food needs. Although global supply chains are operating at near-normal levels, and near-average global food prices are anticipated due to ample global food supplies, localized disruptions to trade flows within some countries are already being reported; these are likely to result in periodic market shortages and volatile prices for select commodities. In some cases, measures are also impeding physical access to markets. Furthermore, due to a likely decline in export earnings linked to reduced global demand for commodities like oil, metals, textiles, and high-valued agricultural crops (IMF), many countries of concern are expected to face a decline in critical export earnings. This reduction, and the subsequent anticipated depreciation of local currencies, may lead to an increase in the cost of imported goods in local markets.

Projected humanitarian food assistance needs

Access to food is increasingly constrained for millions of households across the globe as countries implement necessary measures to suppress the spread of COVID-19 that, at the same time, restrict vital income-earning opportunities. Urban and peri-urban poor households constitute a majority of the increase in needs, though most of the global population in need of food assistance remains the rural poor. Overall, an estimated 94 million people across the 29 countries monitored by FEWS NET are likely to face Crisis (IPC Phase 3) or worse outcomes and will need urgent humanitarian food assistance (Figure 2). Greater severity of acute food insecurity is also likely among some already food insecure populations.

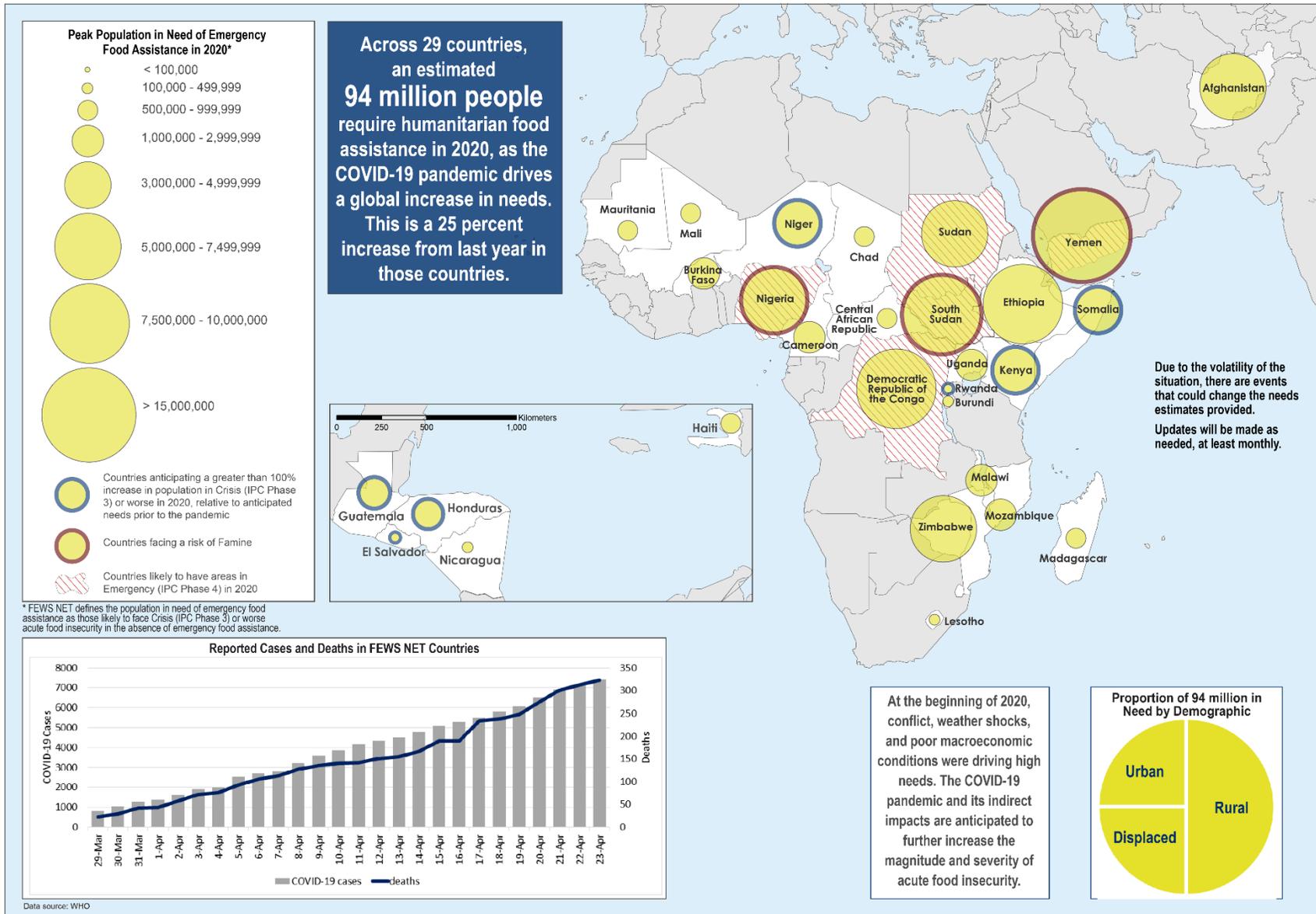
Figure 1. Estimated peak food assistance needs across FEWS NET's presence and remotely monitored countries; estimated increase in needs due to COVID-19 impacts denoted in blue



Source: FEWS NET

¹ FEWS NET's presence countries include Afghanistan, Burundi, Cameroon, Chad, DRC, Ethiopia, Guatemala, Haiti, Kenya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, Uganda, Yemen, Zimbabwe; FEWS NET's remotely monitored countries include Burkina Faso, CAR, El Salvador, Honduras, Lesotho, Mauritania, Nicaragua, and Rwanda.

Figure 2. FEWS NET’s anticipated peak needs in 2020 across 29 countries, including the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on food security



*The above estimates include the population in Crisis (IPC Phase 3) or worse, in need of urgent humanitarian food assistance; estimates do not include populations who are Stressed (IPC Phase 2)

Source: FEWS NET

For more detail on each country, please see FEWS NET’s country-specific reporting at [fews.net](https://www.fews.net)